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Coming back around  
Roundabout funds won't put end to signal project

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CLARENDON — Just when it seemed dead in its tracks, plans for a roundabout in Rutland County could start rolling again thanks to a \$1 million boost from the federal government.

Plans for a roundabout at the intersection of Routes 103 and 7 seemed to be scrapped a year ago, when officials at the state Agency of Transportation declared their intention to install traffic lights at the dangerous intersection.

It seemed like the final nail in the coffin when work began last month on a \$600,000 traffic signal project at the four-way crossing.

But a \$1 million appropriation included in the federal transportation reauthorization bill last week has given state officials pause and the roundabout's supporters hope for the future.

"It's kind of like the project was just hit with the paddles and there's a squiggly little line on the monitor now," said Richard Baker, chairman of the Rutland Region Transportation Council.

In this case, the doctor holding the defibrillator was Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., who put in a request for the roundabout shortly after the Transportation Council first endorsed the proposal three years ago.

And even though state officials dumped the idea, Jeffords kept the request in the transportation bill because of the local desire for it and because roundabouts have worked well in other states, said Jeffrey Munger, Jeffords' aide on transportation policy.

"What happened here was there was a reluctance on the part of the previous (state transportation) secretary and program director to put in roundabouts," he said. "But we think roundabouts have a place in the transportation puzzle and the

senator felt it was important to listen to the local folks."

The Transportation Council and select boards from several towns, including Clarendon and Shrewsbury, went around and around with the state over which traffic control technique was superior.

The four-way intersection in Clarendon, which includes Squire Road on its west side, has been the site of several serious accidents, some fatal.

Both sides agreed that safety should be the priority of any solution, but that's where the agreements end.

State officials contended that traffic lights had proven to work at intersections just north of the Route 7-103 exchange and they argued that a roundabout would be too much of a surprise to motorists traveling at high speeds along Route 7.

But roundabout supporters argued that halting for a traffic light on the roadway — where the average speeds were clocked at about 65 mph — was more unsafe and would result in more accidents. On the other hand, a roundabout, which slows traffic by forcing motorists into a circle with a sharp turning radius, would slow traffic down without bringing it to a dead halt, local officials said.

In the end, the state rejected the roundabout proposal and moved forward with its plans for traffic lights.

The lights are in the process of being put up, but one state official said Monday that \$1 million in federal money could change some minds.

"I think it would be prudent to take a second look given the earmark," said Richard Tetreault, director of program development for AOT. "We'll have to weigh the advantages of using the federal money toward the roundabout."

That statement is a quiet turnaround from the position taken by his predecessor. Tetreault and AOT Secretary Dawn Terrill weren't around when former Secretary Patricia McDonald and former director of program development David Scott decided to install traffic lights at the intersection.

Tetrault said he would have to discuss the roundabout proposal with his traffic safety team. But, he also said the state had no plans to stop work going on now at the intersection.

That position puzzled a number of local officials who wondered why the state would continue working on a \$600,000 project if they had any thought of replacing the light project with a roundabout — which could cost anywhere from \$400,000 to \$1.2 million, according to estimates from the state and the Transportation Council.

Rep. David Potter, D-North Clarendon, who also sits on the Clarendon Select Board and the Transportation Council, said he couldn't understand what the agency's intentions were after talking to an AOT official Monday.

"He said 'We don't like to return money to the federal government,' but he followed that up by saying they were going ahead with the lights and would probably look at the roundabout in another two years," he said. "It seems like a shame to spend all that money on the lights then replace it only a few years later with a roundabout."

Potter said he has the sense that many of his constituents want traffic lights at the intersection, but he has always supported a roundabout and still does.

He said he hoped the state would stop the construction at the intersection while it considered a roundabout.

"It makes no sense to spend that money if you might change your mind," he said.

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